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Jack Anderson

Grenada's Rulers Feared the Churches

U.S. troops overthrew the communist government of Grenada apparently just in time to prevent a crack-down on Christian churches. Captured documents indicate that organized religion was soon to be a major target of the revolution.

The case against the churches was prepared by Maj. Keith Roberts, who headed the KGB-style "Special Branch." His report, dated July 12, 1983, and stamped "Top Secret," was presented to the prime minister, Maurice Bishop.

So far as can be determined, Bishop never implemented the plan to suppress religion on the island. But intelligence analysts believe he was ousted and killed by hard-line associates precisely because of his reluctance to stamp out opposition with true Marxist zeal. The willingness of his successors to murder Bishop—and perhaps 100 others who stood in their way—indicates how they might have dealt with troublesome church leaders.

Roberts identified the Roman Catholic Church as "the No. 1 antagonist of the revolution." He listed the Anglican Church as "a major threat to the revolution," the Seventh-Day Adventists as "hostile" and the Methodist Church as a "challenge."

"Most reactionary of the lesser churches," the report declared, were the Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists and Church of the Open Bible. Roberts viewed as seditious an "upsurge in open-air crusades, house-to-house [proselytizing] and tract-giving by the non-traditional religions." These sects, he wrote, were in "a frenzied drive" to win new members.

The regime's goal, he wrote, was "to control all churches, their leadership, membership and their activities."

Perhaps the most startling recommendation was to use Catholic priests to subvert their own religion and advance the cause of Marxism in Grenada. Roberts apparently had in mind those priests in Central America who have developed a schoolboy crush on Marxist revolutionaries.

"Promote contacts," he urged, "among clergymen and members of laity from Nicaragua and other Latin American countries linked to the theology of liberation and, in general, to the idea of a church committed to revolutionary positions."

Roberts discussed the manipulation of religion in candid language that obviously was never intended to be read outside the ruling Marxist clique. The document was among thousands that were captured last October by the invading Americans and shipped to a Defense Intelligence Agency location in Virginia. My associates Dale Van Atta and Jon Lee Anderson have obtained a copy.

Roberts saw the Catholic Church as a threat to the revolution because its 70,000 members have "a very deep trust in the church," which surpassed their loyalty to the ruling New Jewel Movement.

He went on: "We think that in the medium term, if serious measures are not taken, we can find ourselves faced with a Poland situation."

It would be difficult to silence the Catholic Church, he suggested, noting that it has been on Grenada since "the coming of Columbus to the island" in 1498.

Roberts recalled that when Bishop seized power in 1979, all the churches had adopted a "wait-and-see" attitude. But it had become clear, he wrote, that leaders of the churches "are to different degrees hostile to the revolution."

Most vocal of all, apparently, was Catholic Bishop Sydney Charles. Roberts noted that in November 1982, Charles began "to push the line that the church will face its biggest 'challenge' in 1983." Roberts predicted that the bishop would become "bolder in his attacks against the Revolution."

The memo described Bishop Charles as "very popular among the churchgoers" and accused him of delivering intelligence "on the Grenada situation" to a meeting of bishops on a neighboring Caribbean island in February 1983.

Six of the island's 18 Catholic priests were named in the memo as "the most dangerous" to the revolution. Concluded Roberts: "It is abundantly clear that the Roman Catholic Church is gearing up for confrontation with government."